

Are Chatbots the Future of Training?

by Vince Han

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Alyssa just finished new manager training with high hopes about the months to come, eager to start applying what she learned to her new role as a team leader. At this point, if Alyssa is like most people, she'll get sucked back into work and remember about 20 percent of what she learned. She might occasionally try to conjure up the principles she learned, but they rarely present themselves in situations where she could readily apply them. She loved the training, but the ideas just aren't sticking.

Companies invest thousands—if not millions—of dollars into their training programs, eager for their employees to apply that training to day-to-day business practices. However, for a fraction of the investment of the initial training, Alyssa's company could add a reinforcement chatbot to this scenario and change the result entirely. According to Psychotactics.com, the normal 20 percent retention rate more than triples to 75 percent by simply dedicating practice time. Trainers may encourage this practice by following up individually with participants, but in most cases that's neither practical nor scalable. This is where a chatbot can make all the difference.



Traditionally, email reminders have been the primary channel to push out reinforcement messages to participants. But as instructional designers know well, getting a learner to pay enough attention to an email follow-up is as hard as getting a teenager to put her cell phone down during dinner. Chatbots are emerging as an effective tool to continue the conversation.

What is a Chatbot?

A chatbot is an automated, yet personalized, conversation between software and human users.

Programmed to anticipate human responses, a chatbot automates communication for an assortment of applications, with an equally vast variety of benefits. Not only are bots totally unbiased (making them completely cool-headed in even the tensest customer service situations); they also use the most current and relevant communication channels to contact users.

The most common uses of a chatbot in today's technology landscape are for consumers. For example, the Expedia chatbot on Facebook Messenger helps you book a hotel room; Taco Bell's forthcoming Tacobot enables users to order a taco via a chat window on its website; and the on-demand text message concierge called Magic can book you a hotel room and order you a pizza.

Kik, the popular messaging app for teens, recently launched a Bot Shop to reach its fans in more engaging ways. News organizations such as the Washington Post and Quartz have built bots to deliver news. Even Barbie has joined in the chatbot fun, creating the Hello Barbie doll to interact with consumers.

Chatbots are also commonly found as productivity tools. The Slack team now has its own chatbot platform too, with a host of applications (including the aforementioned Tacobot). It recently teamed up with PayPal to create a bot that facilitates money transfers through the Slack platform to expedite exchanges between individuals and teams.

The evolution from using a chatbot as a productivity tool to using a chatbot to facilitate employee learning and development is natural because a good chatbot can communicate with learners in the same way friends and colleagues do. Learners won't ignore a message from a dear friend, and they likely won't ignore one from a chatbot if the chatbot is smart, friendly, and adds value to their day.

Uses for L&D

Designing a chatbot is as much an art as it is a clever use of technology, and presents a new, compelling challenge for instructional designers. After all, you are trying to get a learner to



engage in an ongoing conversation with a computer. Depending on the context of the training program or support initiative, a chatbot can be designed to focus on a variety of tasks:

Providing reminders. Reminders are only effective if they can cut through the clutter of the day and actually reach learners. Chatbots that integrate with popular messaging channels allow reminders to drop right in among learners' regular conversations and reach them where they're already comfortable.

Reminders. Reminders also can be specifically scheduled to arrive at times when learners need them most. A friendly message from a chatbot that reminds learners of concepts learned will work to mitigate the forgetfulness curve. It creates another link in the memory chain, which ensures that the concept is better remembered and, in the future, better applied.

Tracking goals. When training workshops end with the participant making some meaningful goal, a chatbot can be designed to be an effective accountability partner. Being held accountable by another person (in this case, a chatbot) makes individuals 33 percent more likely to achieve their goals, according to a study conducted at Dominican University in California. A chatbot can send regular reminders, ask about progress, and provide resources for a participant.

Introducing new concepts. The limited time we are given to host a learner in a workshop or course means we are limited with the amount of valuable content we can teach. With a chatbot extending the conversation, sometimes months at a time, an instructional designer can add new concepts to the learning experience and deliver them weeks and even months after the classroom experience has concluded.

Assessing transference. Assessments determine how well content is absorbed by learners. This kind of quizzing and testing can be delivered via chatbot, after a training course or seminar, to ensure that those who have participated in the course have not just listened to, but really learned the topics presented.

Chatbots easily can offer binary choice (for example, true/false) and multiple-choice questions to measure learning progress, and collect feedback in the form of open-ended responses from learners.

Supporting continued performance. In a perfect world, one could hire a coach for every learner to act as a 24/7 resource; a chatbot is the next best thing. You can train a chatbot to be able to answer learners' questions on demand—helping them to apply the lessons in the moment when they need it the most.



Gathering data on return on investment.

Instructional designers are constantly asked to deliver an ROI calculation on the training programs they build and deliver. The challenge with that has been a lack of means to gather data from learners on whether they are applying what they learned.

A chatbot solves that problem by collecting information from the learner for months after a training course. This can include asking users for self-assessments and concrete examples of application. Data can be collected, analyzed, and delivered in a format that shows how well participants apply training even months after a course is over.

The Future of Chatbot Applications

A chatbot's only constraint is a designer's creativity. A single chatbot can have multiple purposes. While most people still associate bots with automated confirmation texts, we are starting to see a much wider set of applications:

Customer service or FAQ agent. For customers and employees alike, it's always useful to have an accessible resource for questions. There's perhaps no easier way to get a question answered than to text it to your friendly neighborhood chatbot and get an immediate answer.

Employee: "Where do I find the spec sheet for the new product the company just announced?"

Chatbot: "Here it is! <http://goo.gl/productspec>"

Chatbots also can notify project leads or company managers of any unanswerable questions.

New employee onboarding and training.

Whether the onboarding process is months long or lasts only a few days, a chatbot can help keep that training in the forefront of a new employee's mind. This is especially essential because the first few days, weeks, and months are usually a deluge of information.

Chatbot: Hey, I just wanted to check in on your first week! Were you able to complete your onboarding paperwork?

Employee: I did. What else do I need to get done before my first month is up?

Chatbot: Nice! Way to take the initiative. Before your first month is over, you also need to finish your workplace safety training and diversity and inclusion training.

Diversity and inclusion training. Whether a diversity and inclusion training program is offered internally or by an outside contractor, supporting that training outside of the class itself is integral to making sure the learning converts to more conscious behavior.



Chatbot: Time for me to check in! How well were you able to encourage Mary to speak up during your all-hands meeting today?

Manager: I think I did pretty well. I made sure to ask her to share her thoughts on a project I knew she had a stake in. She seemed comfortable and eager to share.

Chatbot: Great work! Keep looking for ways to include your more reserved direct reports in group settings :)

New manager training. Some of the most important training in any person's career, new manager training is designed to give individuals the skills they need to become successful leaders. As with any other kind of training, however, there's only so much that a new manager can absorb in the moment. Consistent reminders, tips, and challenges sent right to their phone can keep new managers on track and help them better use the training they've received.

Chatbot: Hey, Alyssa. Earlier this week we talked about improving one-on-ones with your direct reports. On a 1-5 scale, how would you rate your one-on-one with Marco today?

New manager: I would rate it a 3. We talked about his career goals.

Chatbot: Got it. This week, reach out to him and see how you can better support his role.

Chatbots and the world of artificial intelligence are still very new and many training professionals may not know where to learn more or how to get started. Most of the major messaging platforms have chatbot software development kits to play with, such as Facebook Messenger and the Microsoft Bot Platform for Skype. Several do-it-yourself platforms exist too, such as Chatfuel and Textit.in, as well as enterprise chatbot provider Mobile Coach.

While still a nascent technology, expect to see more and more chatbots permeate the daily digital life of your learner community. Whether chatbots are used to help employees remember what they learned or to drive better on-the-job performance, it's exciting to see the leveraging of this technology help people work smarter and better. Hey, who knows—maybe a chatbot actually wrote this article.

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